“God made us different, so that we might become friends, and we might love one another”

A conversation with Cardinal Matteo Maria Zuppi, archbishop of Bologna, after the G20 Interfaith Forum that took place in his diocese in September

The reproduction of the Holy Sepulchre in Bologna symbolically marked the opening and closing of this great meeting of religious and political leaders as part of the G20 Interfaith Forum.

What did this G20 Interfaith Forum represent for Bologna and what relations do you have with the Foundation that coordinated the event?

Bologna’s vocation is to be an economic and, above all, a cultural crossroads between north and south, east and west. It is a welcoming city, where the first university of the Western world was born. The urban architecture demonstrates this vocation with the famous arcades of the historical center, under which it is possible to walk sheltered from rain or sun. Bologna, therefore, invites to meeting and relationships. The G20 Interfaith Forum that we have just experienced confirms this vocation. The diocese has collaborated a lot with the John XXIII Foundation for Religious Sciences (FSCIRE) and with its secretary, my friend Professor Alberto Melloni. We work together regularly, as witnesses to a presence in culture and history, also in connection with the faculty of theology and the university, desiring to find a common language.

The challenge is to ensure that the opportunity for encounter not be separated from daily life. This G20 Interfaith Forum has chosen to encourage exchanges between political and religious leaders, in order to offer an ethical contribution to the meeting of heads of state at the end of October in Rome. The fact that the Italian Prime Minister has decided to come to Bologna during those days attests to the fact that our “common home” needs a broader vision, one that is not only economic, but one that takes into account the human person in all his or her dimensions, both historical and eschatological.

Positive secularity is not questioned, it must only enter into a respectful dialogue with religious realities, so that social harmony and unity in diversity may grow.

On the sidelines of the G20 Interfaith Forum, you celebrated the Eucharist with all the priests of your diocese in the church of San Domenico, where the body of the homonymous saint rests. What can this great figure of the Middle Ages tell us today about the theme of universal fraternity?

Dominic of Caleruega understood that here, in Bologna, the foundations of the future were being laid. He wanted his community to be present among the students at the university to enrich minds and form people through the light of faith that opens the heart to others. Few people know that St. Dominic rests in Bologna, yet his current message deserves to be emphasized in relation to this G20: he is the man of community, of fraternity. The Tavola della Mascarella on which the first portrait of Dominic was painted shortly after his canonization – chosen this year as the symbol of the eighth centenary of the Dies Natalis of the saint – depicts him at the table with his brothers, whose faces evoke different ethnic origins. He lived in a period of transition and can deeply inspire us as we face the epochal changes we are going through.

On 11 September, in the church of Santo Stefano in Bologna – where there is a large reproduction of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem – the G20 Dialogue opened with an interreligious prayer for all the victims of those attacks perpetrated in places of worship. The G20 ended on September 14 – feast of the Holy Cross – with a concert in the same church, near the copy of the Holy Sepulchre that reminds everyone of the Holy Land. What meaning does this symbolic place have in your eyes?

When I go on pilgrimage to the Holy Land, I love to sit alone at the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem in the evening, praying for peace. The difficulty of living together in the Holy City is a permanent invitation to dialogue and peace. God made us different so that we might become friends, and we might love each other: this is the message of this G20 of dialogue and encounter.

Interview by François Vayne

(October 2021)